Success in eLearning: What is the recipe?

Formal Education

Quality Issues

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ELEARNING FOR HUMAN CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT AND ENHANCEMENT

The trend

As technology continues to permeate all facets of our lives, the application of technology for learning and capacity enhancement has also expanded in breadth and depth. The question to ask is no longer "whether" organisations will implement eLearning, but rather, "whether they will do it well?" (Rosenberg, 2001).

Against this backdrop, there is a growing number of "recipes" for successful eLearning design and delivery. In a research carried out by Ann W. Armstrong (2007) for 15 companies in the US, covering over 25 major web-based learning initiatives, she found an eSUCCESS framework which embraces eight tenets, namely: **e**xecutive sponsorship, **s**upport from the organisations, **u**nderstand and motivate the learners, **c**ulture fosters learning, **c**ontent is relevant to learner and organisation, **e**valuate and assess, **s**tructure of programme is engaging, interactive and blended, and **s**imulate the work environment and work tasks.

In another "recipe", the focus is more on deep learning that results in behavioural changes. Cercone (2008) suggests that successful course design models should include connecting new knowledge to prior learning, maintain collaborative interaction between students, promote a self-reflective environment, include immediate applications and advance self-regulated learning. The result of such a design is that the learning will be deepened (Fink, 2003; Majeski & Stover, 2007).

At Commonwealth of Learning (COL), we have developed our own eLearning recipe through the eLearning with International Organisations (eLio) initiative. As the Learning Manager for the eLio initiative, I have had the privilege of providing eLearning to employees working in international organisations such as the United Nations organisations, the multi-lateral development banks and the Commonwealth Secretariat. After ten years of involvement and having worked through a hundred cohorts, we have found a recipe that helps a dispersed, mobile and busy workforce to enhance several core competencies required to deliver on their targets such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the Education for ALL (Dakar),and the Commonwealth objectives. Or, more simply put, our e-Learning courses have helped professionals in the field sharpen their skills so that they can achieve their targets of helping refugees find shelters and safety, assisting the rural poor to gain clean water, or helping a child to find access to education.

COL eLearning with International Organisations Initiative

I have experienced first-hand the customisation of 12 eLearning courses covering a wide range of subject matter from effective communication to debt and data analysis and reporting. Furthermore, we have built

a pool of 45 professional distance learning tutors who have supported 6,500 adult learners based in over 100 countries around the world. COLeLio e-Learning courses have consistently maintained an average completion rate of around 80%. Throughout the years of working with eLearning courses of different subject matters and delivery formats, I have witnessed the constant change and transformation of course production and presentation brought about by forever-changing technologies.

When we first started the journey in 2000, we cherry-picked on whatever technologies were available to support our course production and presentation activities like Word, Excel, CD-ROMs, PDFs, emails and listervs. By 2005, we had upgraded to software like Macromedia Flash, HTML pages, and XML files for materials development. Since 2009 we have explored learning platforms like MOODLE for online learning management, Basecamp for online collaboration and Survey Monkey for online evaluation. For learner record management we have gone from CIS to Aceware to Access. I am witnessing a trend of convergence emerging where materials production, learner support, data collection and sharing, assessment and evaluation, and individual and group communication can all happen in ONE place; we have come full circle.

Although there have been tremendous advances in eLearning technology, it is just one component of the COLeLio recipe for eLearning success. Let us take a look at the main ingredients of the COLeLio eLearning recipe and see how they are mixed for success.

COLeLio eLearning design

There are three main ingredients:

1. Materials customization
2. Virtual connection
3. 360 degrees of support

1. Materials customization

Materials customization is critical in COLeLio's development of eLearning courses. As Armstrong (2007) points out, simulating the work environment and work tasks and ensuring content is relevant to the learner and organisation are key factors in eSuccess.

When COLeLio first designed the first effective writing course for the United Nations High Commissioner for the Refugees (UNHCR) in 2000, we tried to find a course structure that would support global learning (6,000 learners) for each individual who aspired to sharpen their written communication. The learning objectives were to write messages or documents that were clear and succinct, reader focused and targeted at results. With this sole aim (one size fits all) in sight, the challenge was to create a course design that would "fit" the different writing needs of professional, technical, administrative, and operational staff. On top of that, the course also needed to "fit" the multi-national, multi-cultural, multi-lingual and multi disciplinary education background of the writers. There were native English writers, English as a second or third language writers and English-as-a-foreign-language writers who were at varying levels of competency in writing and wanting to seek improvement and empowerment through training.

Therefore, with the development of the UNHCR course, and all subsequent courses with other international organisations, we started with one size, but allowed two levels of tailoring to happen by answering three questions: "What training outputs and outcomes does the organisation want?" "What do learners write on a daily basis?", and "How well does each writer write?"

To address the first question, COLeLIO undertakes a thorough needs analysis to clearly understand the organisations' mandate and mission and their USP (unique selling point) in delivering on their mandate and corporate plan. Then we look at what organisational standards, guidelines and templates are there in governing external and internal communication of strategies, outputs, outcomes and impacts. Based on our understanding of the information collected, and supplemented with extensive interviews of stakeholders and potential learners, the course development team formulates a curriculum plan, with reference to Bloom's taxonomy, on guiding the creation of a course blue-print for subsequent development work to happen. The course blue-print is a detailed document encompassing content, instructional design and technology application story boards.

The first tailoring of course materials is on an organisational level. The second level of tailoring is at the individual learning level. For example, with the UNHCR Writing Effectively course, by looking at the second question on what writers write, we used a "building blocks" type modular design of the materials and a foundational module on "Effective Writing Principles" was created. The purpose was to bring every learner, regardless of their roles and levels in the organisation, onto the same page in recognizing what is considered effective writing and how one can achieve it by grasping the writing process of planning, organising, drafting, revising and proofreading. Once the knowledge of the writing process is consolidated in the foundation course, learners are taken to the next level of applying this knowledge captured to the next elective modules on how to write short documents (like emails, letters, memos, minutes and summaries) and how to write long documents (like reports and proposals). Learners are asked to pick the module that best applies to the type of writing formats they handle at work. By applying the writing processes learned in the foundations course into relevant and authentic UNHCR documents created in their next elective modules, the breadth of writing needs by different writers is covered. The extensive research and collaboration with UNHCR that went into creating and customising the course materials ensured that the course content was relevant to the learner and organisation which encourages learner motivation and management support.

The third question asks how well each individual learner writes. There are strong and weak, fast and slow, and native, non-native writers. How do we help each individual to seek improvement and empowerment? The answer lies in the one-on-one tutoring that every COLeLio learner receives. At course start, the e-tutor will read the entry essays of the learners submitted as a proof of their language competency to establish their writing standard. Having done that, the tutor will work with each learner to set up the learning goals and chart a road map to arrive at the goal. The road maps could be different for different learners to demonstrate the customisation at learner's level. Depending on the strength and the capacity of the learner, the tutor will set realistic step by step milestones to guide the attainment of the end goals. This takes care of the individual writing needs of learners in a way which is both self–advancing and self-regulating as alluded by Cercone. As a result of which we are seeing behavioural changes in writers. Many learners express in the course end surveys that they have become more confident and reader-focused writers and are more diligent with revising and proof-reading as a result of the course.

2. Virtual Connection

Once the customised course materials are developed, staying connected with the learners is the next priority for the COLeLio team. COLeLio course presentations are organised in a cohort arrangement which means that the same group of learners will start and finish learning according to the same time lines. The advantage of this arrangement is that it is easier to administer than the open registration system. This is also made possible as the commissioning organisations are footing the training bill for all the employees. COL plucked a magic number of 100 learners per cohort to be the optimal size of a

learning cohort. While this is the standard class size, the number can fluctuate between12 to 300 based on the demand for just-in-time learning and the availability of the training funds.

With an invisible group of a hundred dispersed learners, it is easy to lose touch and sight of them. A key contributor to learning success is connectedness. We have worked hard to create a sense of connectedness with all our course participants. With learners from over 50 countries from all corners of the world, COLeLio has to establish a mega classroom that exists in cyberspace. The lowest denomination of technology is applied to ensure the greatest level of connectivity and access. Most importantly, we always strive to inject a human touch to this virtual classroom.

We transform the cold isolation of eLearning via a mega classroom by having a cadre of highly skilled and trained adult eLearning tutors to connect with learners in the mega classroom. They are required to send weekly emails to check on learners' study progress. We ask emails to be kind, understanding, supportive and clear. If any learners are behind and have gone silent for long, tutors need to find out why and report to COL through Monthly Progress Reports of each learner. COLeLio will follow up on each missing learner as soon as they are flagged and we do not let go of them easily

The role of the tutors is much more than just marking assignments, they are also acting as learners' mentors to help them overcome learning hurdles, and as counsellors to help them stay focused despite balancing work, family and study. Their virtual presence assures learners that they are not out of sight and out of mind. Learners are aware that they are not alone in their learning pursuit and they are being cheered on all the way to the finishing line.

To further enhance our ability to virtually connect with our learners, COLeLio embarked on a MOODLE learning platform in 2009 to place all learners, tutors and administers onto one shared space. With MOODLE, the class identity and bonding has strengthened significantly. Since setting up discussion groups in MOODLE is relatively easy, COLeLIO has introduced group discussion forums for both learner - learner and learner - tutor interactions. If people choose to stay personal, one to one email is also available.

With MOODLE, COL administration is able to use bulletin boards to broadcast news to all learners, post important course information in eye-catching places for learners, set up key date reminders on a calendar and turn the site into a virtual space for learners to come together to interact, to pick up course information, and resources that they need.

MOODLE operates in both a push and pull manner. As it supports online submission, learners cannot ignore it. Assignments are to be dropped in the right spot for marking. Tutors are notified when assignments are submitted, and learners are notified when they are marked. COL administration can check assignments submission and marking progress by monitoring the assignments submission button.

Graded reports are accessible on MOODLE for learners to monitor their own progress and their transcripts are nicely laid out for their pick up. Certificates are also spit out from MOODLE for printing. The MOODLE course delivery platform has enabled COLeLio to provide even more virtual support than before, and it has made the eLearning experience into a truly mega classroom for global learners.

3.360 degrees of support

Customised course materials and virtual connection are two main ingredients, but for the COLeLio team, providing 360 degrees of support has always been the most important ingredient in the eLearning success recipe. In our experience, this support forms a 360 degree view of each learner. This all round

view connects learners with their supervisors, training officers in commissioning departments, personal tutors, peers and COL administration.

For every learner to succeed, s/he needs that round of support. First of all, supervisors are required to endorse the learning initiative and be supportive with time and resources allocation. Second, the training department must support learners with timely materials despatch and follow up on any late or non-arrival of materials, and any IT connectivity or access issues which the training department is expected to broker a fix or a solution with the technical support team. Third, the personal tutor supports the entire learning process as s/he communicates with individual learners on a weekly basis. One of our tutors has an effective means of breaking the ice with his learners. He starts by describing what he sees outside his window in Cardiff Wales and asks each of his learners to do the same. Learners respond enthusiastically by telling what they see outside the window and often the scenes are so different and varied that it is the tutor whose appreciation of the world view is enhanced. Fourth, the COLeLio administrative support team ensures a quality learning experience is happening for all those who are involved.

The personal writing tutor makes every learner feel closely supported throughout the course. A key component of tutor support is the marking of assignments. Tutor marked assignments (TMAs) are crucial in providing evidence of learning, and evidence of tutoring. The way to verify the attainment of learning outputs and outcomes is from the assignments submitted. It is also through the marking of assignments that tutors and learners are engaged in a dialogue for self reflection, for gaps analysis and for perfecting practices. Tutors are required to give detailed and constructive comments in a discursive manner. For strong learners, the experienced tutors will help them to push their limits to achieve greater effectiveness. For weak learners, tutors will try to break the learning outputs into even smaller chunks for bite size absorption. Now that the COLeLio team has begun to use MOODLE, this has enabled the tutors' involvement with learners to broaden. At learning forums, tutors can create group dynamics and momentum for learning. The peer to peer help and influence can be motivational. For learners studying in the same office, tutors sometimes encourage study groups to be formed for problem solving together and for collaborative learning.

COL administration always maintains a virtual help desk to respond to lonely learner's questions. It also directs queries to the right parties, connects people to cross-fertilize and seeks networked help whenever or wherever such a need is requested. The 360 degrees of support ingredient ensures that every learner has a strong encouraging team behind them throughout their whole learning journey.

Conclusion

The COLeLio successful eLearning recipe is about applying the three key ingredients to make learning fit the purpose, to engage and motivate learners through layers of support and to turn invisible learning into visible learning outputs and outcomes.

COLeLIo has learned the importance of using course materials and design customisation to fit the one size curriculum with the individual's need to learn and need to excel. We also have learned that it is crucial to connect learners and tutors in a virtual global learning environment – the mega classroom. Technology has enlarged the boundaries of a classroom, but without the human scaffolding as glue to learners, the mega network could crumble under its own weight. Connecting people in a virtual learning environment will turn isolation into collaboration. In a face-to-face learning environment, participation means all. In an eLearning environment, learning participation is shown through evidence of learning and the proof really is stemming from demonstrating what has been learned through the submission of assignments.

The balance of eLearning success ingredients is often dictated by the availability of time and resources. COLeLio understand that each email to each learner counts and each re-submission means perfecting the practice.

It has been said that the best recipe is one that is prepared with love, care and passion. This holds true for the eLearning success recipe. COLeLio is able to advance and expand this initiative because of a lot of committed tutors and course developers who pour their time and energy into helping an international workforce work harder and better to build peace, eradicate poverty, and improve the lives of the weak and the marginalised people of the world. No matter the details of the recipe, the ultimate success of eLearning has been its ability to spread the power of education and training wider and further than ever before.

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